

Returning to Her Roots, She Shows High School Students Possibilities She Never Knew

WHEN **TYPHANYE PENNIMAN** WAS GROWING UP in the South Los Angeles city of Compton, she had no role models to tell her about public health. It wasn't until Penniman had completed her undergraduate education at UCLA and then gone on to work as a health educator in Inglewood that she began to appreciate the impact public health could make in underserved communities such as the one where she was raised.

"It's easy to take things for granted where you live and not realize that it could be different," she says. "It never dawned on me, for example, that there were no healthy places to eat in my community – until I moved to Westwood as a UCLA student and saw places like Whole Foods and Jamba Juice, with soy protein and tofu being sold everywhere. There was none of that in Compton."

Her work as a health educator for a nonprofit agency – in which she counseled high-risk youth on reducing risk for unwanted pregnancies and sexually transmitted diseases, including HIV – awakened Penniman to the difference she could make in people's lives through public health. "I became very interested in learning how to affect behaviors in my community," Penniman says. So she went back to school, earning her M.P.H. at Cal State Long Beach in 2002, and then enrolling in the doctoral program at the UCLA School of Public Health, where she has completed coursework and is preparing her dissertation on the impact of family dynamics on people with HIV. Penniman's research has been funded for the last four years by the National Institute of Mental Health, and she recently was awarded two more years of funding from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. After earning her degree, Penniman hopes to go on to a career in academia.

For the last year, Penniman has also served as the instructor for the school's Youth Into Health Professions course, which is taught in South Los Angeles and draws high school students from the Watts and Compton areas. The introductory public health course, offered free of charge for college credit, serves the dual purpose of motivating high school students from underserved communities to go on to college and exposing them to public health as a potential field of study. "Most of the students who are interested in a health profession have been focused on medicine," Penniman says. "That's because they haven't learned about public health – or, if they have, they didn't know that's what it was." The course's students are paired with mentors from the Students of Color for Public Health, a UCLA School of Public Health interest group in which Penniman has been active.

The opportunity to show high school students from her community the possibilities in public health – something Penniman never knew at that age – has been especially rewarding, she says. "It's wonderful to see the light bulbs go off as they realize the difference that public health measures such as taking junk food out of schools can make," she says. "They get excited when they learn what public health professionals can do, and as we talk about advocacy and show them that they can have a voice in what goes on in their communities."



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— Typhanye Penniman (center), with high school students Jesus Torres and Yvette Aguilar, part of the Youth Into Health Professions course.